From evidence to re-enactment : history, television and documentary film

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FROM EVIDENCE TO RE-ENACTMENT:

HISTORY, TELEVISION AND DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Abstract

There has been a significant increase in the number of history programmes and documentary films about history shown on television since the 1990s. This is due to technological and institutional changes in international television but also to the wider commodification of history. The new technological means and approaches have also provided new opportunities for filmmakers in the field of history documentaries. In this article, we are interested in the role of history in television and documentary filmmaking in general, and in how developments in television and documentary filmmaking have affected the nature of historical documents on television. We are particularly interested in the relationship between history documentaries and academic historical research. What do these changes mean from the point of view of both academics and filmmakers? We approach the question from the standpoints of media practice and the concepts of *truth* and *history culture*. As a case study, we focus on the documentary film *A Man from the Congo River* (2010), directed by one of the writers.

Keywords

history documentary film, television, history culture, rhetoric, authenticity, re-enactment

Introduction

I screened a work print of my documentary film *A Man from the Congo River* (2010) for a colleague, a well-established, older generation documentary filmmaker named Seppo Rustanius. The film was a historical documentary about Akseli, who worked as an engineer on riverboats in colonial Congo at the beginning of 20th century. It is based on original diaries and letters, and it uses photos and archival materials as well. Besides, there are a few scenes where we see the main character´s hand writing in his diary and his shadow moving on the wall. The old-school documentary filmmaker Rustanius was upset. 'These scenes are not true, not authentic, they are fiction, you can´t use them', he acclaimed. For me it was not a problem; similar kinds of constructed scenes are screened and aired every day. In that sense, Rustanius was right: something had indeed happened to the documentary film and its relationship to evidence and historical truth. Something had also happened with respect to television, the concept of history and the attitudes of audience.

This article[1] focuses on this change, on how media practices, television and history have all affected one another. One of the writers is a documentary filmmaker and the other one a professional historian who specialises in television history. Our aim is to combine these two perspectives because we think that they currently intersect with each other more than ever before. We are trying to figure out how the practices of historical documentary filmmaking and the concept of history have changed in the last decades. What means are filmmakers using to convince audiences of their historical interpretations and how have they changed over the years? What is the impact of new digital technology on history documentaries? What is the current relationship between television and academic historical studies? And how does all of this affect the way an audience senses and experiences history?

Television's role in presenting history is, however, a subject of tension among professional historians. Historical documentary films may have been seen as populist 'second rate' form of doing history that inevitably involve the 'dumpling down' of academic history (Bell 2011, 3, 8). The most obvious criticism of televised history concerns its tendency to simplify history. Television, for example, simplifies complicated entities, relies on myths, ignores the latest research and does not take into

account different interpretations. More ‘traditional’ historians have been suspicious about using personal testimony and mediated popular memory as a starting point in historiography. They have blamed television for being a postmodern medium that cannibalizes styles and images from the past and, consequently, furthers cultural amnesia. First of all, television as a ‘passive illustrative’ medium has not been seen as a real producer of history in the same way as a printed book. In general, those who have criticized television have often been academics – excluding cultural scholars – or other ‘intellectuals’.[2] For instance, the well-known American media critic Neil Postman (1985) has blamed television for ruining America’s four-hundred-year-old typographic culture. In addition, Postman claims that it has also trivialized rhetoric.

However, this attitude by professional historians has changed during the recent decades. For instance, using oral history documents in the discipline of history has raised questions concerning the usability and validity of the documents within the discourse of source criticism. The rise of oral history was a part of the so-called linguistic turn and ‘history from below’ trend started in the 1960s. Nowadays, many historians think that oral history materials should not be discarded as a priori unreliable evidence. Instead, of treating memories as an unreliable source, they argue that oral history should be approached in such a way that what is important is not whether people simply remember something incorrectly, but the reasons for why they chose to remember it in a certain way. (Kalela 2012, 31) According to this way of doing history research, sources are not reliable or unreliable; they are merely informative in a different way.

We are particularly interested in the practise of documentary filmmaking in the reference of history theories. Besides the question of re-enacting, we explore such epistemological concepts as truth, authenticity and evidence. More generally, we see history television documentaries, first and foremost, as a part of history culture.

Although the concepts above have been relatively broadly discussed both in the field of history studies (e.g. the journals *Rethinking History*, particularly vol. 11, No.3, 2007 and *Journal of Philosophy of History*) and documentary film (e.g. documentary theorist such as Bill Nichols and Brian Winston), there are relatively few case studies

that explore the relationship between documentary film and academic history research.

Recently, Northern Irish filmmaker and academic Demon Bell, however, has presented views that remain our approach both in the methodological sense (practice-baseness) and having a historian as co-author (Bell 2011; Bell & McGarry 2013). Our view, however, differs from Bell's approach in a sense, that we are particularly interested in the relationship between documentary film and history theories.

Methodology

In analysing the documentary, *A Man from the Congo River*, we apply the approach of *practice-based* or *practice-led research*. In our case, it means that we want to advance knowledge about practice by reflecting our own creative work (see Candy 2006; Barret & Bolt 2007). We want to analyse critically work practices and make tacit knowledge visible. The self of the researcher-artist is essential in art-based, practice-based research (Griffiths 2011, 167) and reflexivity is one way to approach this question. Reflexivity is often specified to personal and epistemological reflexivity, the former referring to the individual subject position of the filmmaker, and the latter to more general methodological and theoretical approach (Bell 2011, 6). In this article, reflexivity is considered more epistemological. We are aiming at rational reconstruction (Bell 2011, 7) of the filmmaking process, including the critical reading of the process and the final film.

We are analysing what kind of aesthetic and cinematic means have been used in the film A Man from the Congo River and discussing why certain decisions were made during the filmmaking process. As research material, we are using filmmaker´s notes, synopsis, six script versions and one editing script. The filmmaker also kept a work diary during the shootings. This material helps us to construct the process and answer at least some of the questions concerning the form and content of the film. However, these decisions are not made in isolation; t is not only the question of personal reflexivity, not even epistemological reflexivity, but also wider interaction between the filmmaking process and the concepts and ideas of history, which, we claim, have been mediated and changed radically during last decades.

Television and history culture

There are more and more employment opportunities for historical documentary filmmakers because showing history on television is nowadays even more popular than before. There has been a 'history boom' in the early 2000s in general; it seems like history is everywhere. It has become a significant part of popular entertainment – a leisure pursuit. History has been described as 'the new rock'n'roll, the new gardening or the new cookery' (de Groot 2009, 17). In the early 21st century, television has been one of the most important agents for communicating historical events. Television became a mediator and a significant factor in the history of culture in general – a sort of shop window for promoting an interest in history amongst the general public, which was noted also by the scholars and the filmmakers (see Edgerton 2001, 1–16; Downing 2004, 18–19; Schama 2004, 23; Hunt 2004, 94–95; Kershaw 2004, 118–123). This flow of historical images has only multiplied since television proceeded to the 'era of plenty'[3] at the turn of the millennium (Ellis 2000, 163–178).

The increase in the number of channels, digitalisation, (technical and economic) convergence and effective global media markets have changed television in many countries. In particular, the digitalisation of television has opened up markets for niche channels and pay TV such as the History Channel.[4] This means that the volume of production and broadcasting history programs has increased exponentially in recent years.

History documentaries should be seen as a part of a broader *history culture* in which memory plays a central role. The concept of history culture refers to the wide range of activities in which images and information about the past are produced, mediated and used, and also to the ways in which historical consciousness is socially constructed and expressed in different societies. These activities help societies and individuals construct concepts of themselves, their environment and the world around them. One of the key theorists in the field, German historian Jörn Rüsen (1994, 219–225), has divided history culture (*Geschisctskultur*) into three dimensions: aesthetic

(*ästhetische*), political (*politische*) and cognitive (*kognitive*). All three dimensions can be found in current history documentaries.

The development of communication media has created a mediated historicity, as media scholar John B. Thompson (1995, 24) has put it.[5] Television shapes common experiences of history through its ritualistic, even-style coverage and its capacity for endless repetition, which is fed by hidden global memory banks. The flow of historical images, such as certain famous archival film clips, creates a collective consciousness (Anderson 2001, 19–22; Hoskins 2001, 334–335). Therefore, television plays a significant role in mediating *collective memory*. As the one of most influential theorists in the field, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), has emphasised, historical representations have an important role in creating collective memory.

Making history culture in practice: *A Man for the Congo River*

When a historian is preparing a research project, he or she is trying to reconstruct and interpret the past in a particular context. According to methods of source critic, he or she is using different historical sources and critically estimating their reliability. It substantially resembles the process of conducting research for documentary films. In the case of the aforementioned *A Man from the Congo River*, the whole project started from a footnote in a research article that mentioned several Finnish seamen working on the Congo River during the worst years of colonialism. Together with historian Seppo Sivonen, another scriptwriter, I conducted rather extensive research in different archives and museums in Finland, Sweden and Belgium. Finally, we found the diaries and letters of our main character in one museum. After that, it was clear that the film would be based on these materials, and we tried to reconstruct Akseli's point of view. He was at the heart of colonial terror, yet he played only a small part in the larger racist colonial system. The film tells how he changes from an innocent bystander to an active participant in colonial society during his long years in Africa. While using violence to keep black workers in line, he was at the same time an intelligent and quite sympathetic person.

There are of course epistemological demands that are stricter for a historian than for a documentary filmmaker. Nevertheless, the biggest difference is in the way in which the 'results' are represented or history is interpreted. Whereas an historian uses words, a filmmaker makes use of the broad opportunities available through visual, aural and cinematic means to express his or her interpretation. Affective, emotional means offer one important way for understanding the past.

In this film, we used a wide variety of audio-visual elements to tell the story and visualise history:

Figure 1: Audio-visual elements in *A Man from the Congo River*

Visuals:

- photos (of the main character + general photos of the era)
- archival film (river boats, scenery)
- maps
- animation
- objects in museums (whips, knives, cameras, etc.)
- archival paper documents (letters, newspapers, passports, etc.)
- scenes showing museums and archives
- places where the events took place shown in the present day; historical remains
- texts superimposed on pictures, the names of places, etc.
- metaphors and symbolic scenes (a statue of Christ without a hand)
- parallel pictures combining the present and the past (shots of the military today)
- abstract pictures (close-ups of water)
- re-enactments (a man writing in his diary, the main character's shadow)

Audio:

- voice of the main character (the diaries interpreted by an actor)
- neutral, 'objective' voice-over

- music of the era
- score music (by composer Tapani Rinne)
- sound effects
- silence

These different kinds of elements are orchestrated to create aesthetic impressions. The pictures and sounds are edited together to strengthen the story and the historical argumentation and to make the film more fluent and coherent. All three dimensions of history (aesthetic, political and cognitive) presented by Jörn Rüsen earlier can be found in our example.

The aesthetic dimension particularly affects an audience's ability to sense history through memory work. The most obvious aesthetic form where these elements can be found is literary fiction, but it can also be found in more factual representations as well as in documentary films.

The aesthetic elements of history in *A Man from the Congo River* are created through the main character and the plot. The story of a heartbroken Finnish man who escapes the depression and unemployment of his home country and travels to Africa, a continent that offers more opportunities, is a typical way of representing history through the narrative of an individual. In addition, this individual story has more general significance. Akseli Leppänen stands quite well for an average Finnish person recruited for the colonial Congo: he was male, single, educated and looking for adventure. What was untypical was his age. He was 34 when travelling to Congo (immigrants were usually younger). Akseli's matureness was revealed in his diaries since the text is thoughtful, reflective and sometimes even philosophical. That was positive for our project, because we could build the narrative to Akseli´s own voice. In the early script versions, there was more of his text, which was cut off from the final script.

In academic history, this method has been used particularly in the tradition of *micro-history.* Then a researcher, whose point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the account, will focus on individuals or other small units of research, such as villages or communities, to illuminate larger phenomena in history. Methodologically, micro-

history stresses the need of testing historical constructs against existing reality in the small scale. The tradition has also emphasised narratives of history as well as *micro-biography*, i.e. the biography of a relatively unimportant individual (see, e.g. Burke 2008, 262–265; Iggers 2005, 110).

According to Rüsen, (1994, 223–224), historical memory has a significant role in legitimising political power. But as we have often seen in the history of documentary filmmaking, films (and other artistic representations) can also be an effective way of criticising political power. In *A Man from the Congo River*, the political dimension (power) can be seen in the way how the past is presented through colonial racist exploitation, especially in the forms of violence, pain and death. The film shows the colonialists as ruthless and cruel conquerors – not only brave adventurers or pioneers of civilization, as Akseli and his contemporaries saw such famous explorers as Henry Morton Stanley. The fact that the Belgian king Leopold II viewed the Congo as his private corporation and made it into a vast labour camp based on terror, where black people were tortured, mutilated and executed is made clear in the film. This topic was evident already in the synopsis and in the early script versions. For me, as a filmmaker, telling this individual story in historical and colonial context was one of the motivations to make the film.

The cognitive element (truth) is most obviously present in the voice-over of the film, both through the reading of the diary of the main character and through the relating of historical facts about colonial Congo – especially the terror and genocide. Besides showing images of original documents, for instance passports and letters, we also showed various archives and museums in several scenes. They strengthen the impression of reliability when referring to institutions. But do these pictures make the historical interpretation offered by the film more 'real' or authentic?

Authenticity, 'truth' and reconstruction

Authenticity is an essential question in history documentaries, both from the point of view of history and from the point of view of the audience and filmmaker. For professional historians, the question of authenticity is the question of 'truth', which has been a tricky concept for historical theory, at least since the 'linguistic turn' of the

1960s. Some postmodernist history theorists of the late twentieth century even went so far as to suggest that academic historiography is a form of fiction. According to this way of thinking, reality is an illusion and the concept of truth in history is irrelevant. For instance, British historian Alun Munslow (2003, 86) has stated that a continuing debate over the definition of truth in history should not be "a matter of debate at all."

Finnish history theoretician Jorma Kalela (2012, 42–46) has suggested that when evaluating interpretations, it is sensible to give up the notion of truth and to think instead in terms of distinctions: the 'soundness' of the knowledge produced and the 'meaningfulness' of the findings. The latter presumes the former: the findings must be fruitful and truthful in order to constitute plausible knowledge. But truthfulness is only one aspect of interpretation, and a historian's 'job is not to disseminate absolute and unconditional version of the past but, rather to furnish materials for serious debate' (Kalela 2012, 42-46). This is, we believe, the common goal of scholars involved in historical research and filmmakers making history documentaries.

Although truth can be a relativist concept in the sense that there are always different types of knowledge and people attach different meanings to truth, professional historians – and documentary filmmakers – generally do not think that the past is just a plaything of the present. It is not useless to discredit myths, correct distortions and authenticate events. As Italian (micro-) historian Carlo Ginzburg (1999, 49), one of the most important representatives of 'new histories' after the linguistic turn, has stated: 'The debate about truth is one of the most important (in a sense, *the* most important) intellectual issues with which we are confronted.'

Estonian historian Mark Tamm (2013) has introduced the idea of a 'truth pact' when it comes to the search for truth in historiography. It refers to a mutual agreement between the historian and his readers. Although the reconstruction of history could be done differently, the intention of a historian is to pursue the truth. It is a pact based on honesty, one which can also be verified by other historians.[6] A similar idea has been introduced to describe the relationship between the filmmaker (or text) and viewer as a kind of social agreement. It is important for the audience to understand the nature of the audio-visual presentation, for instance is it fiction or documentary? (Aaltonen

2006, 41–42.) In the ‘horizon of expectation’ (Jauss 1982), *A Man from the Congo River* is situated in the documentary genre by the audience, so the presentation is understood to make claims about historical truth. These claims can have different cinematic forms, but they are claims anyhow. Although the voice-over is read by an actor, it is shown several times that the text is from Akseli´s original diary, for instance.

The issue of authenticity is not as important as it used to be in theoretical discussions about documentary filmmaking. The idea that there can be several interpretations of history – even in the same film or programme – is obvious. Reality and history are not only somewhere out there beyond our subjective grasp; they are also created and constructed through television and in documentary filmmaking all the time. This also concerns the viewing experience. Furthermore, audiences are much more aware of the nature of historical documentaries as artificial reproductions of history.

This notion obviously also concerns the question of *evidence* of documentaries, both documentary films and historical archival or other documentaries. Traditionally, empiricists in academic history have defined history as a process in which a series of happenings are investigated (‘objectively’) through evidence. This attitude changed along with the linguistic turn at the latest when new kinds of approaches laid ground for the profound rethinking of what counts as valid evidence – what is the status and orientation of historical evidence in postmodernist history (see eg. Fellman & Rahikainen 2012; Thompson 2004, 27–40). However, the concept of evidence in history research was challenged already in the 1930s. For instance, the famous French historian Mach Bloch (1949, 79–80), one of the founders of Annales School, noted that “it has been many a day since men first took it into their head not to accept all historical evidence blindly”.

Bloch’s contemporary colleague – another giant in the field of history theory, particularly the philosophy of history – Englishman R. G. Collingwood also rethought the concept of evidence in his posthumously-published classic *The Idea of History* (1993/1946) written in the late 1930s. He wanted to separate a scientific history research from those authors who simply construct history by “excerpting and combining the testimonies of different authorities”, which he called *scissors-and-*

paste history. This kind of method is only interested in statements, but does not ask what these statements mean. Scientific history research, instead, reinforce testimony by evidence. (Collingwood 1994, 257, 274–275). This *scissors-and-paste history* remains the attitude of the critics of history documentaries, who have compared televised history programmes with coffee-table history books that reinforce historical myths and simplify history (Chapman 2001, 136).

Bill Nichols (2008) has interestingly referred to Collingwood's thinking of evidence. Firstly, he sees it as self-evident that a documentary filmmaker, as much as a scientific historian, must have a capacity to interpret critically and analytically facts and events when using them as evidence. However, he also criticizes Collingwood's choice to use a murder mystery of John Doe as a metaphor of using evidence since the approach neglects to see the historical complexity. Nichols' view is justified albeit anachronistic. We must remember that although Collingwood had witnessed the First World War and the Russian Revolution when wrote the essay, the very complex turmoil of the later 20th century has profoundly confused our perception of history as linear chain of events or other clear regularities.

All in all, Nichols sees documentary film as a discourse that seeks to externalize evidence which, in turn, is a part of discourse: "facts become evidence when they are taken up in a discourse; and that discourse gains the force to compel belief through this capacity to refer evidence to a domain outside itself." He also emphasizes the rhetoric character of documentary film as "a form of embodied speech". (Nichols 2008, 29, 36.)

This, we think, is central in documentary film in terms of political dimension of history. Nevertheless, as Nichols (2001, 49–50) has discussed the concepts of fact and evidence elsewhere, they also have a strong aesthetic – or artistic or artificial proofs in Aristotelian sense – dimension which is realised in ethical, emotional and demonstrative ways of a documentary filmmaker when he conveys as the voice of oratory.

The questions of authenticity, evidence and truth in documentary filmmaking are crucially bound up with the concept of *reconstruction*. A filmmaker finds and creates

materials for history documentaries by intervening with the world. British media scholar Brian Winston (2000, 105–106) has devised a model that describes the various levels of a filmmaker's intervention in reality. Winston calls it a *reconstruction continuum*, and it ranges from non-intervention to total intervention.

Figure 2: Reconstruction continuum

NON-INTERVENTION

PERMISSION

DELAYS AND REPETITIONS

RE-ENACTMENT OF WITNESSED ACTION

RE-ENACTMENT OF HISTORY

RE-ENACTMENT OF THE TYPICAL

ENACTMENT OF THE POSSIBLE

ENACTMENT OF THE UNTYPICAL

ACTING WITNESSED HISTORY

ACTING

TOTAL INTERVENTION

WITNESS…….IMAGINATION

The continuum describes how actively a documentary filmmaker is involved in the situation and how he or she organises the world in front of the camera. At the one end of the continuum, a filmmaker is not involved at all; he or she just has access to shoot the shots. The traditions of *direct cinema* and *observational cinema*[7], where 'reality' is observed without interfering with it in a positivistic and behaviouristic way, are examples of this end of the continuum. The level of involvement increases towards the other end of the continuum, until finally we reach the tradition of fictional filmmaking.

Although Winston writes generally about documentary films and concentrates on the moment of filming and what happens in front of the camera, these ideas are also relevant for all kinds of cinematic representations of the past. We have marked the area of historical documentaries with italics in Winston´s scheme.

Archives and reconstructing history

Traditionally, the reconstruction of the past in history documentaries has been based – more or less – on 'real' material: the photos and archival footage of real events or interviews with real people. Photographs have been used as evidence. The indexical and iconic nature of photography seemingly guarantees the authenticity of the picture. Actually, this has never been the case; nothing has 'guaranteed' the truth, except the intention and ethics of a filmmaker. Even in analogical times, it was easy to falsify photographs. But nowadays critics and viewers alike are questioning authenticity more often in light of the digital opportunities to modify and falsify photos. In history documentaries, it is becoming a part of everyday practice to manipulate photos, to add elements, to combine several pictures, and so forth. But for several history documentary filmmakers, traditional, 'indexical' authenticity still means a great deal. For instance, works by Ken Burns are based on authentic photographs. In Finland, the aforementioned film director Seppo Rustanius has concentrated on documentaries about the 1918 Finnish Civil War.[8] His films are based on photographs and archival footage, and they have also been referenced in academic history works. Rustanius is very precise and strict about the authenticity of the photos. They have to be shot in the right place at the right moment, and the audience must be able to trust the filmmaker in this sense. (Aaltonen 2006, 77.)

The practise of using archival photos and film footage has become noticeably looser during recent years. The material is often used to help viewers visualise a certain era, using, for instance, generic pictures or impressions of a period or place. A filmmaker may encounter the problem of having pictures that are almost correct. In *A Man from the Congo River*, the events happened during the 1910s, but the archival footage was from the late 1920s or even from the beginning of the 1930s. The question for a filmmaker was thus: Can we use this material to help viewers visualise events? And if so, should the audience be informed that the pictures are not from the actual era? The question is highly ethical and highlights the differences between the source criticism of professional historiography and historical documentary filmmaking. In this particular case, the footage was used because the boats looked about the same as they did in the 1910s and the geographical location was correct.

One of the crucial questions is: are the photos just illustrating the voice-over? This practice is, of course, a common convention in the documentaries. It could also be asked whether the pictures are creating atmosphere, commenting or constructing a plot or claiming something cinematically. At its best, the material does this all. However, often a filmmaker has to make compromises. When editing *A Man from the Congo River*, we just did not have all those pictures or archive footage we wished to have. Often, a documentary filmmaker is able to tell a story and make historical claims only with those visual and auditory materials available. We used Akseli´s own photos, but also several other photos by other Nordic workers on the Congo River.

For a filmmaker, the problem is how to re-contextualise old archival material, which can originally be a sign of something totally different, with its own precise and special meaning. A classic example is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a Nazi spectacle that serves as a visually stunning propaganda film even today. Frank Capra used images from the film in his famous series *Why We Fight* (1942–1945). The images of strength and youth in Nazi ideology were transformed into images of danger and evil in the hands of the American filmmaker. Since then, the images in *Triumph of the Will* have been used in countless history documentaries and they have become a part of common historical iconography. In a similar way, the meanings of the Belgian propaganda pictures about technical and social modernity in the Congo have been transformed into images of colonialism in the context of the film *A man from Congo River*. For us, these early Belgian films about Congo were extremely valuable. Colonial administration wanted to present the modernity of the colony and pictures of infrastructure were central in these films. Especially steam boats were filmed, because they were the ´high tech´ of the time.

A filmmaker can combine elements by editing pictures and sounds together, but in addition it is now possible to combine elements inside a picture via digital technology. CGI (Computer Generated Imaginary) is also a great tool for documentary filmmakers. Even archival material, such as old newsreel scenes, can be totally reworked. This is the case in the recent documentary *1989* by Anders Østergaard and Erzsébet Rácz. This international coproduction on the European revolution of 1989 reconstructs the past by following two stories surrounding the

events: the former Hungarian Prime Minister Miklós Neméth and an East German couple attempting to cross the Hungary–Austria border in 1989. The use of archival footage and placing the individuals in new contexts 'invites the audience into the secret meeting rooms through a mixture of "testimonials", archive material, recreation, and reconstructed dialogues lip-synch'ed to archive footage of the real political key characters'.[9] Besides the main characters of the documentary reconstructing their past, we see the main politicians of the era, such as the last President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev and Chancellor of West Germany Helmut Kohl, having 'authentic' discussions that were not actually ever filmed. In terms of Winston's Reconstruction continuum, *1989* creates the *re-enactment of witnessed action* by using CGI.

The idea of a photographic image serving as indexical evidence in documentaries has changed in recent years. Ten, even five, years ago, the way in which *1989* manipulates real archival footage would have been improper, if not an act of lying and falsifying reality. But nowadays filmmakers are not that bound to indexicality anymore. Consequently, the number of animated documentaries is increasing as well. A good example is Ari Folman's feature-length animation *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), which tells about the experiences of the filmmaker as a solder in the war in Lebanon in the 1980s. The film explores the question of memory (Steward 2012, 120–126), which is also a central theme in many other present-day historical documentaries.

Re-enacting the past

History documentaries are using *re-enactments* more than ever before. The most evidently the phenomenon is realised in the so-called 'reality-experiential history documentaries', which first appeared on television at the turn of the millennium. The majority of those programmes, which are sort of a mix of reality TV, history documentaries and game shows, are generally seen as 'infotainment', or 'factual entertainment', or 'historical reality', meaning that they are located somewhere between entertainment and education. To put it in a nutshell, they are programmes where 'ordinary people' have been made to live in 'authentic' historical environments, such as in the 19th century American West (*Frontier House*; Brown and Chermayeff, PBS 2002), in the Australian outback (*The Outback House*;

Brewster, Davies, Hall and Scarff, ABC TV 2005) or in London during the Second World War (*1940s House*; Shaw, Chanel 4 2001). (See Hanna 2007, 531–548; de Groot 2009, 165–180.)

However, it is good to remember that this practice has deep historical roots. In general, re-enactment refers to an educational activity in which participants attempt to recreate certain aspects of a historical event or period. For instance, famous battles were recreated in ancient Rome. Nowadays, the re-enactment culture manifests itself within the context of 'living history', such as through representations with theatrical elements or interactivity in museums, computer and role-playing games, and other historicised performances. Re-enactment is one of the key tropes for contemporary historical engagement. It demonstrates the complexities of historical empathy and reinscribes the self in relation to both the 'past' and to a set of tropes associated with a previous event or artefact. (de Groot 2009, 103–145.)

Re-enactment as a history philosophical concept fascinated Collingwood as well. For him, the concept was linked to the question of how a historian can know the past when he or she "is not an eyewitness of the facts he desires to know" and that a historian's "only possible knowledge of the pas is mediate of inferential of indirect, never empirical." However, Collingwood saw re-enactment, first and foremost, as something that happens in historian's mind, "performing and act of thought" – not as something to be concretely, not to mention bodily, experienced (Collingwood 1994, 282, 284.)

In history documentary films, as well as in all mediated history re-enactments, feeling and sensation is a central motivation in using re-enactments. Actually, the crowing use of re-enactments has been seen as one of the indicators of affective turn in the recent history studies (Agnew 2007). Feeling and sensation is crucial also in the act of thought, but, as Collingwood (1994, 287) emphasizes, it is "knowledge, and knowledge is something more than immediate consciousness." This question, we think, is still relevant in history documentary films as well – no matter how 'discursive' we see them or not.

Re-enactment is not a new thing in documentary films, either. Already in the first years of cinema, famous news events were re-enacted. For instance, Georges Méliès made these kinds of films, calling them *actualités*. In 1902, he even made a film about the coronation of Edward VII before it even happened. Unfortunately, Edward got sick and the coronation was postponed. Hence the 'documentation' of this historical moment was shown before the actual event. (von Bagh 2004, 26.) So this was not actually a re-enactment; maybe we could call it a 'pre-enactment'. However, the audience was not bothered by this turn of events. The audience's sensibility for distinguishing between fiction and documentary only started to develop gradually.

The audience's attitude towards re-enactments in documentaries has varied over time. In the years of *direct cinema* and *cinéma vérité* in the 1960s and 1970s, re-enactment was considered a form of cheating or being dishonest. The line between documentary and fiction was very strict at that time. Social sciences, behaviourism, positivism and methods of neutral observation all affected documentary filmmaking. However, documentary filmmakers have always made certain types of set-ups or re-enactments. In practice, the boundary between fiction and documentary has always been quite blurry, which makes the question of authenticity complicated if not even sometimes irrelevant.

Often, we see recognisable persons from the past in re-enactments. They are shown in historical situations, but the scenes are not actual drama or fiction. There is not enough dialogue or dramaturgical structure to the scene for that. The nature of the scene is more often descriptive or epic rather than pure drama. The characters in re-enactments are usually performers or substitutes and not real actors; they represent historical figures, but they do not play the actual role or character. We might see them only partially: from behind, as the shadow of a face or only as a hand. Handwriting or a shadow on the wall in the film *A Man from Congo River* is a quite typical form of re-enactment in history documentaries. It was easier to construct the scene and keep storytelling fluent with the use of these pictures. On the other hand, they did not depart too much from the general documentary style of the film.

An interesting example of the contemporary re-enactment in documentary film is Joshua Oppenheimer's recent and acclaimed film *The Act of Killing* (2012). The film

tells about political murders in Indonesia in the 1960s. Gangsters and politicians, those who committed the murders of communists, re-enact the events by themselves. As Oppenheimer said in an interview (Behil 2013), instead of survival victim's testimonies, he wanted show how the perpetrators imagined themselves and how they wanted to be seen. The film, "documentary of the imagination" is quite performative, mixing in elements and roles from American genre movies, which the gangsters admire and imitate. Accordingly, Oppenheimer does not consider himself as a documentarian. He also sees direct cinema and other observational documentary as a form of fiction – in the same manner as the extreme postmodernist history theoreticians such as American Hayden White (1973) saw historical texts as literary forms (tragedy, comedy, irony etc.).

Conclusion: From passive illustration to active creation

Academic historians have argued that television is unsuitable for the construction of history because it produces forgetfulness, not memory: the *flow*[10] of television handicaps a viewer's ability to contextualise historical events and also her or his ability to retain them. The most obvious criticism of televised history concerns its tendency to simplify history ('coffee-table history').

According to our view, current audio-visual history presentations, with their re-enactments and other means of producing history, have the potential to provide new ways in sensing and understanding history, sometimes better than ordinary literary forms. Instead of disdaining history documentary films, academic historians should learn to read them along with visual history culture in general. Television documentaries have a significant role in history culture, and vice versa.

It is crucial both for historians and filmmakers to understand that the means of representing history are changing all the time. During the last few decades, new and different forms, clones or mutations of documentary films and programmes have increased. The new types of documentaries can be quite subjective and interactive; they use multimedia and mix different genres and time periods and challenge concepts of history.

There has been a clear tendency in history documentaries to move from evidence-based, reconstructed historical presentations towards the re-enactment of history. We see more and more history documentaries that are based on re-enactments, or even enactments, of possible hypothetical events. In Winston's scale this means a transition from left to right, from documentation to more creative re-enactments, representations and performances.

The popularity of re-enactments and the new forms of history documentaries must be seen within the context of three phenomena: the development of television, the rise of digital technology and changing history culture. The exponential increase in the demand for documentaries, as well as the reality TV trend, has changed the nature of history documentaries. New technical possibilities are resulting in new practises for history documentary filmmaking.

But digitalisation is also affecting our concept of 'truth' and evidence. Audiences are not looking so much for evidence; they are looking for a socially constructed experience of history. Both historians and filmmakers are creating their interpretations of history – to be interpreted once again by the audience. The question of authenticity or truth is still valid for all, but it is taking on new forms. For a filmmaker, the digital revolution and changes in television culture and documentary film have meant that the concept of authenticity has changed from being a technical question to being an ethical question.

In particular, the increasing popularity of re-enactment – engaging with the past by experiencing history 'bodily' – has changed not only documentary films; it has also affected the way in which the past is sensed in general. History documentaries are no longer only 'coffee-table history' books for television.

In defining the three dimensions – aesthetic, political and cognitive – of history culture discussed above, Jörn Rüsen emphasises the independence of each of the dimensions. All three dimensions are quite relevant for history documentaries. In our approach, we have mostly concentrated on the cognitive and aesthetic dimensions. The cognitive dimension is obviously realised in the concepts of truth and authenticity.

But we would also like to emphasise the importance of the aesthetic dimension from the point of view of academic history. Because of the new possibilities for making history documentaries, filmmakers are able to more actively take part in producing the aesthetic dimension of history culture. Nevertheless, in their storytelling, they could also learn from historians how to contextualize events and people and how to present historical nuances. For academic historians, these artistic possibilities provide opportunities to find new ways to do research, such as to speculate about different paths from the past, to narrate history and, first of all, to learn to exploit and interpret visual sources. This obviously concerns fictional film as well (see Bell & McGarry 2013, 20–21).

It is obvious that the role of television and documentary filmmaking is going to grow in the future, both with respect to history culture in general and in academic history research. History is essentially mediated and media is has an important role in shaping historical consciousness. Different media create new opportunities to reconstruct, interpret, challenge, experience and create history. For this, we need closer co-operation between historians and filmmakers.

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[2] According to the popular culture researchers John Fiske and John Hartley (1996, 116–126), the tendency of the educated class to devalue television stems from tensions between oral and written cultures. Television essentially represents oral culture of a lower value, instead of educational written culture., 116–126.

[3] The first period, from the 1950s to the 1980s, was the ‘era of scarcity’. This was the phase during which public service broadcasting was developed. Television tended to present definitive programming to a mass audience. The second phase, the ‘era of availability’, lasted until the new millennium, and it witnessed an explosion in the number of channels and programmes through cable satellite television and videos (Ellis 2000, 163-178).

[4] For more on the History Channel and its programming, see e.g. Taves 2001, 261–281.

[5] Television’s role in shaping our sense of history is not a phenomenon limited to recent years, however. History has been present in television programming since the beginning. Besides old feature films, historical documentaries were also made for television already in the early 1950s. The most famous historical documentaries on television in the decades before the ‘history boom’ were about war. There are several reasons for the success of war documentaries, but one important, if crucial, factor is that they served a therapeutic function as conduits of personal, family and community memories.

[6] Tamm adapted the idea of a truth pact from French literary scholar Philippe Lejeune’s idea of an ‘autobiographical pact’. But unlike autobiography, which represents the subjective voice of just one person, historical research is guaranteed by other professional historians.

[7] Documentary traditions in the 1960s and the 1970s emphasised a direct relationship to reality; see Ellis and McLane 2005, 186, 208–215.

[8] The Finnish Civil War between the revolutionary Red Guards and White Civil Guards started on 27–28 January and ended on 15 May 1918. The war can be seen both as a part of the Russian Revolution and the First World War. The Whites finally won the bloody and bitter war, but the traumatic and controversial shadows of the war have haunted the Finnish people from generation to generation.
[9] http://www.portopostdoc.com/home-en/ha-filmes-na-baixa-en/view-en/?id=20#C0
[10] A famous television theory concept first posited by the cultural theoretician Raymond Williams (1975).